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Study: Divorced Women Have More Illness

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DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) -- Women may give up more than a husband by divorcing -- they may also lose some of their good health, according to a study by [Iowa State University](#).

The study, spanning 10 years, focused on what happens to rural women's health after their marriage ends, compared with women who stay married, said Fred Lorenz, who co-authored the report.

"What we found was that the act of getting a divorce produced no immediate effects on (physical) health, but it did have effects on [mental health](#)," Lorenz said. "Ten years later, those effects on mental health led to effects in physical health."

The findings came from data gathered from rural Iowa women who were interviewed three times in the early 1990s, and again in 2001. All 416 women interviewed were the mothers of adolescent children when the study began. Among them, 102 women were recently divorced.

During the years immediately after divorce -- from 1991 to 1994 -- the divorced women reported 7 percent higher levels of psychological distress than married women. They did not report any differences in physical illness at that time.

A decade later, however, the divorced women reported 37 percent more physical illness, but no difference in psychological stress that could be directly linked to the divorce, said Lorenz, who co-authored the study with K.A.S. Wickrama, Rand Conger and Glen Elder. The research was conducted out of the Institute for Social and Behavioral Research based at Iowa State.

The women in the study marked off illnesses from a list of 46 choices -- ranging from the [common cold](#) and sore throat to heart conditions and [cancer](#).

Lorenz said it appears there is a link between the higher number of physical illnesses and the different stresses associated with divorce, including financial problems, demotions, layoffs and parenting problems. He added that divorced

women, especially in rural areas, have poor job opportunities and fewer support systems.

Wickrama said the women also suffer stress from having to make changes in housing, insurance, transportation and time with children.

"It looks like (divorced women) are trapped in this vicious circle of financial problems and other stressful life events ..." he said in a statement.

Lorenz said divorced women in rural areas may not have jobs that offer quality health care, and they may put off going to the doctor for preventive care because of financial constraints.

The researchers adjusted the data for age, remarriage, education, income and prior health.

By 2001, 40 of the divorced women had remarried or were living with a partner, and the study found positive influences on the women's health, Wickrama said.

"We found that divorced individuals who remarried indirectly decreased the risk of health problems because they saw beneficial influences on their financial difficulties," he said.

The study, titled "The Short-Term and Decade-Long Effects of Divorce on Women's Midlife Health," was published last summer in the Journal of Health and Social Behavior. The research was part of an ISU study of romantic relationships and marriage in middle-aged adults that began in 1989 in an eight-county area.

Linda Waite, who co-authored the book "The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially," said many studies have shown that when women are divorced or widowed they see a decline in economic well-being, but the long-term effects of the stress of divorce on health is important new research.

She said it can help friends, family, and the legal and medical communities become aware "that divorce often creates a cascade of negative experiences and events for the families involved, with increased need for help, intervention and support."

On the Net:

Iowa State University: <http://www.iastate.edu/>